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RESEARCH AND THE CHOICE OF A COURSE OF STUDY

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Abstract

This paper presents some research on the choice of a course of study as related to a certain social, family and labor context.

The methodology used included the definition of the theoretical basis and a series of empirical investigations which comprised different kinds of surveys, records, observations, participants as well as other fieldwork.

The results obtained shed some light on the issue and raise new questions.

This study was especially carried out to analyze the choice of the following courses of study: Law, Psychology and the different Teaching Courses.

Research and the Choice of a Course of Study

The new dimensions of guidance and the consideration of certain aspects such as labor context, family life, the political situation as well as the regional and local setting lead to the restatement of guidance problems.

The theoretical considerations and research carried out in different contexts and our own professional experience as teachers and researchers have made us assume different perspectives of theoretical work and fieldwork. One of these perspectives has favored research on the problems related to vocational choice and some psychosocial factors that influence these decisions. Taking into consideration previous research done by the Chair of Vocational Guidance of the Psychology course of the National University of La Plata (Secretariat of Science and Technology):

- a) 'Cómo eligen los adolescentes hoy' (How adolescents choose today) (91-93) and
- b) 'Imaginario social/Realidad ocupacionl' (Social panorama/Occupational Reality) (94-97)

A group of hypotheses was proposed. These hypotheses indicated several aspects concerning these vocational problems and their context of empirical application.

We have studied the variable *preoccupation with the future* in the following articles:

"El Desempleo Juvenil – Evaluación de Estrategias" (1997) (1) and "La desvalorización del rol docente" (1999) (2) concerning the teaching courses.

Methodological aspects

The research design allowed for an interpretation of the vocational issue from a socio-educational frame which was intimately related to the labor context.

The process of research included: the definition of theoretical basis, the analysis of the

different issues; posing hypotheses, confronting the information as well as making empirical generalization. The methodology of research-action was also adopted. This enabled the modification of the relations between the subsystems student/institutions/labor market-occupational market.

A structured questionnaire was made, with close choices and the inclusion of check questions which allowed testing the validity of the instrument. Group observations to adolescents were carried out at the Vocational-Occupational Guidance Center of the National University of La Plata. Interviews with "key" referents were performed as well.

Different indicators were chosen: age / sex / whether the individual intends to continue his studies / If affirmative, does he intend to be a full-time student or will he work? / If so, which is the labor area he expects to enter? / Is this area related to his present training or to his future training? / chosen course of study / values that the chosen career will enable him to develop /etc.

As the questionnaire was administered to a pilot sample, certain modifications and adjustments were made to the instrument. The defined population – which consisted of students from the last year of secondary state and private schools of La Plata and its surrounding area– was surveyed in order to determine the definitive sample.

A simple sample was selected at random. This sample was proportional to the sex and main features of the different areas and curricular modalities considered.

Qualitative methodology such as case study and open interviews was used as well. This enabled researchers to deepen the analysis and comprehension of some particular situations in many surveys.

A selection of topics and problems was especially made. This considered certain significant aspects as regards the vocational choices and the enrollments in the corresponding university courses of study. The aim was to look for a theoretical explanation and some empirical support for the field analysis. That is, we made an analysis of the relations between "choice" and "enrollment" in the transition from secondary school to university. Closely related to this, there was some research into the causes of correspondence and difference in certain cases between

- a) massive choice and massive enrollment (Law course),
- b) restricted choice and massive enrollment (Psychology course) and
- c) restricted choice and restricted enrollment (Teaching courses)

This research presented a descriptive as well as an explanatory stage in order to understand the occurrence processes and the causes which produced this correspondence and significant difference.

A) Psychology course of study

In 1993, we carried out some exploratory research called "Cómo eligen los adolescentes hoy". We later continued our research (definitive sample) in "Imaginario Social ³– Realidad Ocupacional" (1995). In both cases, samples were taken from the population of 5th year secondary school students from La Plata (Province of Buenos Aires). To our amazement, we found that there was little relation between the number of adolescents who -given the question about the course of study they would choose after graduating from school- said that they had chosen Psychology (very low percentage) and the massive enrollment in the course of Psychology at the School of Humanities and Educational Sciences of the National University of La Plata (very high percentage). In the following charts, we only present information about the number of students enrolled in certain courses at the National University of La Plata. This only concerns those courses that require regular attendance- and not those that have a decentralized system such as Law and Economics in other regions of the province of Buenos Aires.

1996		1997	
Law	2855	Law	2800
Medicine	2532	Medicine	2532
Economics	2091	Economics	2300
Psychology	1074	Psychology	1470
Fine Arts	1600 (*)	Fine Arts	2000
Veterinary Medicine	756	Veterinary Medicine	1097
Engineering	698	Engineering	780
Odontology	1132	Odontology	759

(*) The School of Fine Arts includes its 23 courses. Students are distributed as follows: Visual Design, 575; Industrial Design, 101; Fine Arts, 342, and the rest corresponds to the 20 remaining courses.

To the effect of our research, it is worth noticing that the National University of La Plata has 17 faculties which offer a total of 81 courses of study. Therefore, if we take as a parameter the number of students enrolled per year, the position of the Psychology course becomes highly relevant.

We question this situation because the other choices of a course of study remain constant in relation to the number of candidates. This divergence made us pose some hypotheses:

- **Hypothesis 1:** This is a course that requires more time in terms of vocational decisions (the first sample was administered in August 1993; the second in May 1995).
- **Hypothesis 2:** This is a course that people choose after they have started other courses.
- **Hypothesis 3:** Most of the students who enter this course come from the interior of the country.

In order to answer these questions, a new instrument was elaborated. This instrument

was administered to a representative sample of students of Psychology who had entered the course in 1996; i.e., the population of students that in 1995 was attending 5th year at different secondary schools of La Plata. With the purpose of comparing data, the instrument was also administered to a representative sample of students who attend the first year of the Psychology course this year (referential group).(4)

The questionnaire explored:

- Place of origin;
- Date of leaving secondary school;
- Moment of deciding on the course of study;

Choices:

- Before the last year at secondary school;
- In the first semester of the year;
- In the second semester of the year;
- While attending another course;
- When finishing another course.

A representative sample of students was taken at random from the total population.

109 students of the Psychology course (attending the second year in 1997) were selected for the representative sample- its population being the object of our study. 142 students who attended first year in 1997 were also considered – this being the referential group.

The following results arise from the answers provided by second-year students:

They decided on the Psychology course

Before the last year at secondary school	35= 32%
During the last year at secondary school	45 = 41%
While they were attending another course of study	29 = 27%

A percentage of 68% is achieved if we consider the percentage of students that chose the course in the last school year (41⁰/e) and the percentage of those who chose as they attended another course (27%). This might indicate that the choice of the Psychology course requires more time. Thus, we may partially confirm *hypothesis 1*.

If we take into consideration the high percentage of students who had already started a course (27%), we can tell that *hypothesis 2* is also backed up.

Finally, considering the total number of students explored, we can ascertain that 72 students, i.e., 66%, come from the interior of the Province. Only 37 students are local residents of La Plata. This certainly confirms *hypothesis 3*.

The reference test, which was administered to first-year students of the Psychology

course in 1997, brought about the following results:

Before the last year	64	= 45%
During the last year	38	= 27%
While attending another course	40	= 28%

Place of Origin	
Interior of the Province of Bs. As.	90 = 63%
La Plata city	52 = 37%

These data confirm the results already presented. (5)

It is interesting to consider the contribution of the research carried out by Anne Roe⁶ who analyzed vocational choices in the frame of psychological theories. In her study, she examines variables other than the role of the family in vocational decisions: the factor of time. She observed that scientists related to the hard sciences made their vocational choices much earlier than scientists related to social sciences did. The psychologists constituted the group which took longer to make their choices.

This theoretical contribution further supports the statement made by our work team in the hypothesis 1: *Psychology is a course that requires more time in terms of vocational decisions.*

Even if it made a contribution, the theory of Roe was subject to criticism:

- 1) To consider a highly limited population restricted to a group of vocational elite and sex since she only studied male students.
- 2) To build a reduced sample.
- 3) Not to establish comparisons with other occupational groups.
- 4) To refer to a middle-class population almost exclusively.

However, the rigorousness of her studies and the time she dedicated to these issues make her the unavoidable starting point for any research into the field.

B) Law course of study

Another course of study worth mentioning due to its current incidence, permanent and sustained in vocational choices, is that of Law. The following data corresponds to the analysis of the number of people enrolled in said course at national level: in 1997, in the 34 state and private universities in which Law is attended (14 national universities and 20 private universities), there were 30,029 students enrolled. Out of the total number of students enrolled in all the courses of studies at national level, 12% chose the Law

course. From among said total, 7,200 students enrolled at the University of Buenos Aires and 2,800 at the National University of La Plata; that is to say, 33% of the students from all over the country enrolled in these two universities.

The hypotheses that account for this phenomenon are the following:

- The wide scope of this course of study, which is opened to different milieus and possibilities.
- The feasibility to delay the final election, as it is a course which does not entail an immediate commitment.
- The permanent presence of these professionals in the media.

From the massive point of view, we consider this course of study has little vocational intensity.

If an analysis is carried out among those who have already chosen the Law course, we find the following:

- a) Some of them are greatly interested in a specific area of Law; such interest being constant throughout the course.
- b) Other group of adolescents see in this course great vindicating idealism and the possibility of doing justice (adolescent ideal).
- c) Other group of youth chose this course because it provides a number of labor fields where they can enter and which they have not defined yet.

The comments and reflections of these young people are made manifest in guidance groups, chats with friends, parents and teachers:

"I don't like Exact Sciences; I'll take up Law and then I'll see what I can do." "Lawyers are always necessary."

"A lawyer may work in politics, education, economics, family, minority; there is always a place."

"All positions in the State are filled with lawyers."

As societies grow more complex, that is, as they become more differentiated, heterogeneous and segmented entities, new productive, political, cultural and social activities emerge; at the same time, there is an exponential increase of conflicts, both real and potential.

This poses the demand for experts and specialists related to legal and regulatory questions. In such team of experts and specialists, the lawyer plays a fundamental role, as he may take over the conflicts that appear every day; it is always necessary to know which the regulations in force are, which their faults are, what changes they require, to what extent said regulations help or hinder the missions and functions of the institution they refer to; and also to what extent those regulations and norms are in accordance with the rest of the law, including the fundamental law of the nation.

Even though there is no demand for lawyers in the labor market, particularly in the press, the television shows which position they have in the society. (7)

A group of first-year students of the course of Communication Sciences (Chair of Methodology and Techniques of Social Research) cooperated with the field work taking into account the information given on the choice of this course; their aim was to verify one of the hypotheses.

During a week they investigated in the open television channels (2; 7; 9; 11 and 13) and at different times, what kind of professionals appeared on these means: programs with journalists, "reality shows", newsreels, etc. The analysis was done according to the following timetable:

from 13 to 16 hs

from 18 to 20 hs

from 21 to 23 hs

During said periods, a record was made of the different professionals that appeared. The record did not include political representatives –many of whom are lawyers– so as not to bias the sample.

Out of 156 professionals detected, the registration made was the following:

Lawyers	90	58 %
Doctors	29	18
Psychologists	18	11,5
Other professions*	19	12,5 %

* All of them were university professionals: engineers, architects, economists, teachers, etc.

C) Teaching course

The study carried out by different investigations reveals how perceiving the "devaluation of the teacher's role" influences the teachers' uneasiness feeling and the vocational choices of the adolescents.

Some of the causes are:

1. The change in the traditional roles assigned to the family and the transference of a lot of obligations to the school, and therefore, to the teacher and the fact that the parents devalue the teachers in this interaction.
2. The violence that emerges in a system that compels the students to stay in but still does not ensure a job.
3. The low wages according to the income in other professions and the real needs.
4. The devaluation feeling the teachers experience on the part of the ministerial and/or government authorities.

The teaching activity entails an intense emotional commitment for it is carried out:

In a situation, the *school*, with its peculiarities, relational and communicational styles; in a certain context and in a specific setting as well, the *classroom*, with a number of individuals demanding and expecting the teacher's attitudes and answers, with his successes and mistakes. All this generates a group emotional climate which together with the teacher's reality and his perception of such reality (warm/ aggressive), will influence his decisions concerning cycles and/or courses of action, the emotional balance being in accordance with said actions.

Even though all the aspects considered so far would be similar in the different contexts investigated, it is worth noticing that the problems become more severe and differ in the underdeveloped countries. By way of example, let us consider what is going on in Argentina. According to our entrance system to the teaching activity, in order to increase the employment chances, the new teachers usually have to go to the educational institutions that are immersed in communities with greater social conflicts. There is also the case of those teachers who, due to their own financial situation, have to take more than one position.

In the last few decades, it has been observed that the adolescents do not choose the teaching course; only those with an intense vocation, the ones who do not have the possibility of studying other courses or those who believe may get a position take up the teaching course. In this regard, we may say that the severe unemployment and underemployment problems in Argentina have partly changed this situation; therefore, enrollment in the teaching courses has changed a lot in a positive way.

Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the data gathered, other relevant aspects are worth mentioning:

- Concern about work increased at all social levels included in the sample. The issue of juvenile unemployment, which affects people aged 16 to 25, has turned into a social problem requiring maximum consideration for the studious youth.
- The parents' opinion variable became more important in guidance decision making. In a context of social and economic crisis, the family plays a fundamental role, providing counseling and containment for the youth's decisions.
- Concern about the future with a negative view increased. The uncertainty resulting from the high unemployment in Argentina, the current situation of downsizing and recession, labor re-adaptation and the closing of sources of work create in the sample studied an emotional climate of lack of stability which greatly affects the adolescents and their view of the future.

These investigations show once again the importance of the relation between theoretical foundations, empirical research and fieldwork. The results rendered throw some light

on the issue, pose a number of questions and provide a field of analysis which may be prolific for further studies.

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